

Colonialism as Rape:

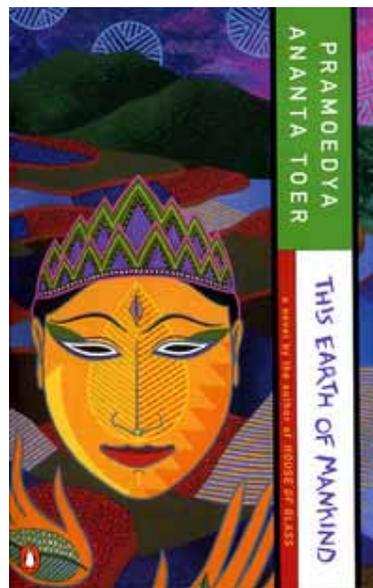
Pramoedya's *This Earth of Mankind*

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Editors' Note: As Professor Borei notes in her introduction to this article, the article is based upon a presentation delivered at the 15th Annual Conference of the ASIANetwork, held in Lisle, Illinois in April, 2007. The article demonstrates how one can successfully use portions of a powerful novel to elucidate historical understanding as part of an Asian survey course.

In the spring of 2007, ASIANetwork panel on "Ordinary People: The Search for Ordinary Lives in Constructing Asia Past and Present" offered three pedagogical methods for introducing students to the experiences of ordinary (non-elite) Asians. In addition to one panelist's critique of a documentary on contemporary Chinese workers and another's discussion of Japanese diary entries written during the Pacific War, I analyzed an excerpt from a novel by Indonesia's leading author, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006). This reading aims to move students beyond an understanding of intellectual, elite Asian responses to Western imperialism and colonialism to a more emotional, psychological understanding of ordinary people's struggle against Western power. The author's compelling description of a Dutch colonist's purchase of and initial sexual contact with his youthful Javanese

anticolonial struggle for independence, as well as rule by Sukarno and Suharto. A prolific writer of thirty works of fiction and nonfiction, Pramoedya participated in Indonesia's struggle for independence from the Dutch, for which he was jailed. He, like the Chinese writer Lu Xun, was a political dissident and wrote as a form of political action. Later, although not a card-carrying Communist,



The Novel: Colonizer and Colonized

The central character in *This Earth of Mankind*, the first in the *Buru Quartet*, is Minke, an upper-class Javanese who attends an elite Dutch colonial high school. He thus moves between two worlds—those of the Javanese nobility and the Dutch colonists. Despite his advantages of class and education, Minke is confused about his identity. In one scene, he wears the Javanese batik sarong along with a Western shirt and bowtie, symbolizing his role as an intermediary between two cultures. His own mother criticizes her son as a

"brown Dutchman," who, though fluent in the Dutch language, is unable to write either Javanese or Malay. Minke's association with the concubine (*nyai*) of Mellema, the Dutch colonial businessman, and his eventual marriage to their mixed-race (Indo) daughter further the reader's understanding of how birth (in the East Indies or Europe), educational level, language ability, as well as skin color (white, brown, or mixed) and class, all affected one's status in colonial society.

In his description of Mellema's purchase and rape of the young Javanese girl, Pramoedya equates Western power with the physical features of the Dutchman.⁵ When Mellema comes to the house to strike a deal with her father, who desires a more prestigious social position with a higher salary, the young girl, keeping her head down, sees his big shoes and hears his deep voice. Later, taken to his home as

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concubine highlights the sense of powerlessness felt by the indigenous peoples in the face of white power. The rape of the concubine is an explicit representation of Western colonialism's exploitation of the non-white world.¹

The Author: Life and Politics

Pramoedya's life spanned three quarters of the twentieth century, thus covering periods of both Dutch and Japanese colonialism, the rise of Indonesian nationalism, the postwar

Pramoedya visited China twice in the 1950s. As a result, during the 1965 military coup against Sukarno, he was suspected of being a Communist and arrested, along with thousands of other leftists. For the next decade of his life (until 1979) he was imprisoned on *Buru Island*,² where he told tales to his fellow prisoners, stories that were written down later as the *Buru Quartet*.³ A harsh critic of General Suharto's New Order, the writer was still under house arrest and his books banned as late as 1998.⁴

his concubine, she tells us of “this giant” with “his voice . . . low like thunder,” a protruding nose the size of three or four Javanese noses and arms as big as her legs. Moreover, his ugliness—white, iguana-like skin, reddish face, and yellow hair—repels her. Bitterly resentful of her father’s decision to sell her for a mere twenty-five guilders, she feels utterly powerless to prevent her fate; she became a slave to him in the same way that the Indies had been enslaved by the Dutch.

Her sense of helplessness intensifies when Mellema brings her to his house where she feels soulless, “like a shadow puppet in the hands of the puppet master.” She describes herself as a defenseless “slave” who has lost her name (i.e., family), because her mother has been incapable of defending her, and her father has sold her as he would a horse. As the story progresses, we realize that, as a concubine, society stereotypes her as dirty, uncivilized, and motivated purely by lust. Furthermore, as a concubine, she can be kicked out of the master’s house for no reason; and she has no legal rights over the children she later bears him or the successful business she builds over many years because she is not legally married to Mellema. Throughout the novel, she remains nameless, referred to only as the *nyai*.

Becoming a concubine also alienated her from her own culture (as Minke’s higher education has estranged him from Javanese culture). She felt her old self “beg[i]n to disappear completely.” Initially unable to communicate with her master, Mellema teaches her to speak and read Dutch, a language she is forbidden to use to defend herself in court later. Mellema not only forbids her to chew betel nut⁶ but forces her to practice the Western custom of brushing her teeth: “He opened my lips with his fingers. With signs he ordered me to brush my teeth. . . . That was the first time I saw a toothbrush and how to use it. He waited until I finished, and my gums hurt all over.”

Several hours after bringing his newly acquired concubine to his home, Mellema rapes her. She describes her fate thus:

That night [he] came. I heard the steps of his shoes as they came nearer. He came straight into the room. I shuddered. The lamp . . . threw light onto his clothes, all white and dazzling. He came up to me. He

picked up my body from the floor, put it on the bed, and laid it down there. . . . I dared not even breathe, afraid that I might enrage him. I don’t know how long that mountain of flesh was with me. . . . I didn’t know any longer what was happening.

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The concubine’s passiveness symbolizes a woman’s inability to fight off her rapist as well as the inability of colonized peoples to fend off militarily superior colonial powers. Students effortlessly identify with the young girl in this passage, thus enabling them to empathize easily with the fate of the colonized.

This Earth of Mankind does of course represent certain problems for the historian. For example, the novel was written about seven decades after the events described in the novel by someone who did not participate in them. The fact that this is a work of fiction also undermines (but certainly does not negate) its use as a primary source. Furthermore, Pramoedya, an educated, upper-class male, cannot be said truly to represent the uneducated, female perspective. Finally, the students in my class read only a brief excerpt, not the entire source, which professional historians ideally recommend.

In spite of these caveats, which themselves provide important grist for class discussion,⁷ the novel allows students to explore many aspects of the impact of imperialism on the colonized. Reading the entire work provides a picture of the complicated class and family structure in the Dutch East Indies, the ways in which language and law were used to discriminate against the indigenous peoples, the arrogance of Westerners who demean the local culture in favor of the superiority of Western “civilization,” etc. Most powerful is the fate of the concubine. As a female, she is trapped by the traditional Javanese patriarchal family system; as a Javanese, she also finds herself dominated by colonial social and legal institutions. Sold by her father to serve as a Dutchman’s sexual slave, she

loses the business she had built over two decades as well as her beloved daughter at the end of the novel. Minke, her son-in-law, analyzes her situation, saying, “this was nothing more than a case of the white race swallowing up Natives. . . .” (333).

Endnotes

¹My academic training focused on Chinese history and my teaching at Guilford was limited to East Asia; but in the decade prior to my retirement I began to introduce Southeast Asia in a new survey on the “Asian Pacific in Modern Times.” In the summer of 2000, I was fortunate enough to participate in an East-West Center seminar on Southeast Asia at the University of Hawai’i (see www.ewc.hawaii.edu for more information). One of the assigned seminar readings was the first of Pramoedya’s four books on the waning days of Dutch colonial rule in the Netherlands East Indies: *This Earth of Mankind* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990). Impressed with the power of this work, I decided to use an excerpt from it in my fall Asian survey in order to illustrate how indigenous populations responded to Western colonialism. Instead of relying—as I had in the past—solely on the intellectual responses of China’s literati and Japanese samurai, this new reading successfully conveyed the emotional, psychological responses of “ordinary people,” thereby reaching the undergraduate on a very different level.

²Pramoedya vividly described the harsh life of prisoners on Buru in his memoir *The Mute’s Soliloquy* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

³The Buru Quartet includes, in addition to *This Earth of Mankind*, *Child of All Nations*, *Footsteps*, and *House of Glass*.

⁴Two surveys I found particularly useful for historical background are M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 3rd edition (Stanford University Press, 2001), and David Joel Steinberg, ed., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, revised edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987).

⁵Most, but not all, of the following discussion will be found on pp. 82-88.

⁶Chewing betel nut was common in Southeast Asia until the twentieth century when it was largely replaced by smoking tobacco. Although the betel nut darkened the teeth, it had some medical benefits as a narcotic and a relaxant. In addition, it was used in various Indonesian rituals. See Anthony Reid, “Betel-Chewing in Indonesia,” *Journal of Asian Studies* XLIV.3 (May 1985): 529-547.

⁷The fact that Pramoedya lived under and fought against both Dutch colonialism and post-independence authoritarianism legitimizes his credentials as a participant in the modern history of Indonesia. Using a traditional primary source along with the excerpt helps to substantiate the reliability of colonial oppression pictured in the reading. More difficult is the fact that Pramoedya was an educated male depicting the emotional reactions of an uneducated female. Not knowing anything about the author, my students assumed that the author is a female, thus leading the class into a fascinating exchange.